President:
Tom Titmus
299-2030

Lafayette Historical Society

POST OFFICE BOX 133, LAFAYETTE, CA 94549

NEWS

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Veterans' Memorial Building and New Lafayette Library

The last six months have seen several—but not all—hurdles cleared on the path to building the new Veterans' Memorial building. In July, the City acquired property in front of the Hillside Inn and Suites on Risa Road as the site for the new building. With this acquisition, the City Council adopted a $4.5 million preliminary project budget, and last August the Lafayette Redevelopment Agency issued $5 million in redevelopment bonds to fund construction. Now we know where the Veterans' Memorial will be, how much it will cost, how we'll pay for it, and who may be using it. One major hurdle still remains, however: deciding what it will look like. The overarching design goal of the project is to create a fitting tribute to veterans that also responds to and complements Lafayette's semi-rural community aesthetic.

In July, after working with a committee of veterans and city staff for six months, architect David Paoli of Field Paoli Architects in San Francisco presented his conceptual plans for the building to the City. Those initial plans were refined (in response to comments by the City) and the resulting detailed plans were submitted for design review in October. After four public meetings, at which the building's design was considered and amended, the Design Review Commission (DRC) still had reservations. City staff is presently working closely with the architect and DRC members to develop satisfactory alternative concepts.

Ultimately, DRC, the Planning Commission, and the Redevelopment Agency all must approve the project before construction bids are solicited. In spite of the planning delays, construction is slated to begin early this Spring. The goal is to have the new Veterans' Memorial Building completed in time for a grand opening celebration on Veteran's Day, 2004.

One interesting possibility has arisen - the City of Walnut Creek, the Walnut Creek Redevelopment Agency, Contra Costa County, and Walnut Creek veterans are all trying to come up with a way to purchase the site of their existing downtown veterans building–dilapidated but valuable property–for redevelopment, and to fund construction of another elsewhere. If this project works out as hoped, the Walnut Creek agencies would contribute $2.75 million or more toward the cost of constructing the Lafayette veterans building. In return, the Walnut Creek veterans would share this new building with Lafayette veterans.

At that time, attention will turn to the construction of Lafayette's proposed new library, since City plans call for it to be erected on the site of the old Veterans' Hall. With fundraising by the Lafayette Community Foundation already in progress, and the planning process under way for the Veterans Memorial Building, the City is now ready to consider the library's design. Both aesthetically and functionally, the design will be central to community life for years to come.

To find the right architect for our library, the Lafayette Redevelopment Agency is hosting a design competition. Last October, eleven West Coast architectural firms, all of which have previously won awards or received accolades for their library

"We believe in the power of history to ignite the imagination, stimulate thought and provide enjoyment. Through our collections and programs we strive to link Lafayette's history to the lives of people."

designs, were invited to submit statements of their qualifications to be project architect for Lafayette's library. Last month, the Lafayette Library Building Committee selected four architecture firms to participate in the competition: Field Paoli Architecture of San Francisco, Killefer Flammang Architects of Santa Monica, Group Architecture Research & Planning of south San Francisco, and Will Bruder Architect of Phoenix. Each firm is to develop conceptual drawings and models, which will be exhibited for public review through February. After receiving public comment, the Library Building Committee and Redevelopment Agency will select the competition winner as Project Architect.

Just as the new Veterans' Building is presently making its way through the Design Review and Planning Commission processes, so will the library, with plenty of opportunity for community comments at all points along the way. If all goes well, sometime in Fall 2004–the day after the Vets move into their new building–library construction will start with the demolition of the old Veteran's' Hall. Completion of the new library is scheduled for Spring 2006.

—by Marechal Duncan

From the President: 2003 Resolutions

Another New Year has blustered in. Well, to be strictly factual, the weather was a bit stormy, *before* January 1. We hope that all your 2002 resolutions have been fulfilled, making room for new ones. Do you feel that the stage has been swept clean in readiness for a triumphant 2003? What about the plans for our Society?

The Lafayette Historical Society is also making resolutions, and, further, following up on them. Board members have begun the process of cataloguing and verifying the locations of the documents and artifacts that have been donated, or otherwise made available, to LHS as custodian of these valuable resources for the benefit of all Lafayette residents and others who may have an interest in our local history. As you are most likely aware, LHS does not presently have an official, permanent home. We look forward to our own space in the new library, where historical documents and other memorabilia may be properly stored and displayed. In the meantime, the cataloguing and database preparation will make the transition easy when it happens.

If you own or know the location of historical items like letters and photos, newspapers, furniture, pottery, etc. that could be made available to the Society, please contact any board member, or drop a note to the LHS at Box 133, Lafayette CA 94549.

It appears that the veterans groups and the city officials of Lafayette and Walnut Creek have been getting closer to "resolution" of the property and financial requirements to begin construction of the proposed new library at the site of the current Lafayette Veterans' Building. A new, separate Veterans' facility is proposed for the west side of Lafayette. The plan has been to combine the Lafayette and Walnut Creek veterans groups in that Building. Contra Costa County and the state may also give an assist. Heck, we wouldn't mind if the Feds kicked in a few bucks. It is anticipated that the current financial crunch, as commented on by all government subdivisions, will not speed closure, but a favorable resolution would be gratefully accepted by the Community.

May a happy and healthy New Year be delivered to you and yours!

—by Thomas Titmus

The Browns Choose the Wilds of Contra Costa

Elam Brown and his family set out for the West in 1846, intending to join Elam's son, Thomas, in the Willamette Valley. While their wagon train was en route, however, the Oregon Settlement was reached with Great Britain: American land laws would prevail in Oregon. This made the prospect of settling in still-Mexican California enticing to the Browns, since the Mexican-American War was imminent, and emigrants were taking up California lands in defiance of Mexican law. Notwithstanding the outbreak of disease and death in the Brown-

Allen party, the wagon train turned toward Alta California.

Upon reaching New Helvetia early in October, Brown persuaded John Sutter to transport Brown's wagon and exhausted oxen by boat to Yerba Buena. From there, the family made its way to Mission Santa Clara. By that time, hostilities had begun. Elam Brown and other American settlers were assigned to the defense of thirty American families gathered in rainy Santa Clara. The younger men headed south with the Fremont Battalion. There followed brief clashes, including the brief "Battle of Santa Clara," with Francisco Sanchez and his marauders.

By the summer of 1847, Brown was working with other Americans in the magnificent San Antonio redwoods, whipsawing lumber destined for Yerba Buena. Steam sawmills had yet to be built. Among the prominent men toiling in the woods were Napoleon Bonaparte Smith and William Mendenhall, friends and fellow "Bear Flaggers." Romance blossomed. In April, Mendenhall had married Mary Allen, a young member of the Brown-Allen party, who had helped bring her siblings west after her sick father was left at Fort Bridger and her mother died at Humboldt Sink. The Mendenhall family eventually settled in the Livermore area, Mendenhall laying out the city and becoming its benefactor. Soon Elam Brown's daughter, Margelina, was wedded to Napoleon Bonaparte Smith. Settling in Martinez and the Alhambra Valley, Smith became prominent in business and farming and took part in state politics and county government. A third wedding occurred in July: Elam Brown married widow Margaret Miller Allen. This union was to last 37 years.

While he was engaged in logging operations, Brown met William Leidesdorff, an important landowner and merchant on Yerba Buena, who had just received Rancho Acalanes in a settlement of a debt. He was willing to sell the rancho to Brown. Thus Brown became the legitimate owner of California land, thus avoiding Mexican hostility to transfers of property to foreigners. Margaret Brown contributed $440 of her money toward the purchase; Elam Brown invested $460 and became trustee of the property.

Elam Brown

LHS Archives

Now, with their own land and lumber, the Browns made ready to move to their new rancho, leaving their friends in Santa Clara wondering why they chose to live a lonely life east of the Oakland hills. They were not lonesome for long, however. Elam Brown invested in Moraga redwoods. Logging operations contributed to the growth of the village of Lafayette. All this makes yet another story....

—By Ruth Dyer

Town Hall Gets its Long-awaited Elevator

"A Look Back at Town Hall," authored by Mary McCosker in the September 4, 2002 issue of *The Contra Costa Sun*, presents an interesting review of the building's history, focusing on its use primarily for theatrical events. Unfortunately, the second floor theater has been inaccessible for many elderly and handicapped people. That is about to change!

An early photo of Lafayette's Town Hall, "christened" on May 1, 1914.

LHS Archives

An elevator (technically a handicap lift) has been installed. This was made possible by generous donations from the Lafayette Women's Club, the Suburban Woman's Club of Lafayette, the Lafayette Improvement Association (owner of Town Hall), the Fiorentino Charitable Trust and Lillian Erhardt of Placerville. Tim Ward of Ward-Young Architects donated the architectural design of the elevator enclosure.

The Lafayette Improvement Association board of Directors wishes to tank all those involved in this exciting project, and Mass Pro Contractors for a beautiful job.

—by Richard Burnside, President, Lafayette Improvement Association

(LHS thanks Richard Burnside for permission to use his article, first published in the *Contra Costa Sun*.)

Lafayette Town Hall Celebrates 88 Dramatic Years

In 1913, having found recreation outside their own community for many years, the people of Lafayette decided to have their own building for social events and meeting rooms. At that time, some "very spirited young men" organized the Lafayette Improvement Club for the purpose of erecting the community hall. After several months' effort, it became obvious that more funds were needed to complete the project, so dances were held monthly in a Happy Valley barn hayloft to raise the money. The ladies of the community served supper at the dances.

Thus, on property donated by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Ghiglione, the Town Hall became a reality. It was christened with a dance on May 1, 1914. These dances quickly became so popular that crowds drove out from Oakland and Berkeley or rode on an extra train (on the Sacramento Northern line) that was sent from Oakland on the festive evenings and waited until the dances were finished—occasionally until 3 to 5 a.m. —to return people to their homes throughout the countryside. There are stories that the hall had springs placed under the dance floor, providing a lively venue for dancing. Town meetings were also conducted at the Town Hall, which came to serve as both a civic building and a dance hall.

1956 marked the beginning of a new role for the Town Hall, that of home to the Dramateurs, a handful of Orinda drama enthusiasts who formed a players' group in 1944 and presented plays in Berkeley until their move to Lafayette. The first two years of the theater in Lafayette were "Theater in the Round," followed by the beginning of an era in 1958, with conversion to full theater production. The Dramateurs became a major part of life in Lafayette, with membership growing from a handful to about 100 in 1972. Community financial support

totaled $40,000 in1964, when building and fire code requirements forced major renovations.

Some highlights of the Dramateurs over the years were the beginning of children's drama classes in 1959, taking "Merchant of Venice" on the road in 1963, the grand reopening in 1966, and the production of "Cactus Flower" in 1971, one of the longest runs in Dramateurs history.

On November 22, 1963, the Lafayette Democratic Club was to sponsor a night of theater, presenting "Sunrise at Campobello." Following the news of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Democratic Club organizers decided that the "show must go on" and it did, reaching the heights of dramatic performance. By the end of the play, there was not a dry eye in the house.

The dramatic history of Lafayette's Town Hall continues today. We know the Town Hall Theater as a place for plays presented by the Town Hall Players, and a place for meetings, while multi-purpose rooms and performing arts theaters have been a venue for student performances.

—by Mary McCosker

In Memoriam...

James Marion Sturman died November 28, 2002, at the age of 90. Jim and his wife, Ruby, folded, stamped and mailed our newsletter for many years. When Ruby passed away a few years ago, Jim moved to Rossmore and continued with the newsletter mailings. A Celebration of Life was held on December 14, 2002.

—by Marechal Duncan

In Memoriam...

Andrew H. Young died May 30, 2002, in Walnut Creek, CA. He was 90 years old. Andy was born in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of a clergyman. He graduated from Harvard in 1933 with a bachelor's degree in economics, with a minor in government. In World War II, he served in the Pacific and commanded the USS LCS-100. Andrew worked for Liberty Mutual Insurance Company for 39 years.

In his civic activities, he was President of the Lafayette Improvement Association and served on the Lafayette Government Study Committee, which led to Lafayette's incorporation in 1968. He was also Treasurer and President of the Contra Costa Historical Society and President of the Lamorinda Toastmasters. Andrew received the Citizen of the Year Award from both San Ramon (1977) and Alamo (1989). Andrew authored "The Improvers of Lafayette" in 1981and "Ways Back" in 1992, both included information about local historical societies.

Andy is survived by his sister, Eleanor Anderson of Greenfield, Mass.; Jeanne Kikkert of Lafayette, CA a companion for many years; Barbara Vetterlein of Granite Bay, CA to whom he was an uncle and father figure; and numerous nieces and nephews.

***—by Ollie Hamlin** (from the San Ramon Valley Historical Society Newsletter)*

May Potluck Speaker

Save the date of May 13th. We are pleased to announce that Jerome Waldie will be our speaker for our annual dinner. Mr. Waldie was our Congressional representative during the late 60's and early 70's. His talk will be on the differences between the Democratic-led impeachment of Nixon and Republican-led impeachment of Clinton. You will get more details in our next newsletter.

Newsletter News

The LHS Newsletter has a new coordinator. Dorothy Walker has agreed to work with the members to put out the newsletter on a more regular basis. Charlotte Robertson will do the copy editing to ensure the newsletter reads well.

Dorothy has been a member for several years and originally worked with LHS on the photo computerization project. Now that she has retired, she will continue with that project. Her main interest is in getting the web site up and running. The next Newsletter should have more about that project. Charlotte is a new member of our group.

LHS is Going On-Line

The computerized photo archive project, which has been delayed for some time, is being reactivated. We plan to get *LaFayette, a Pictorial History* on to the Society's new website by May 1. In addition to the book, the website will have links to other California and national historical societies.

The first installment of the project was compiled jointly by LHS, the Lafayette School District, and the Lafayette Arts and Science Foundation. School children from Stanley school electronically scanned all of LHS's photos and typed the captions. However, we were not able to complete the project, as it became more complicated than our volunteers had anticipated. The current plan is a more realistic scaled back project. The LHS newsletter will keep members up-to-date on what is happening with this project in future issues.

If you are interested in participating in either the web site or archive project, please get in touch with Dorothy Walker, 283-3303.

"Old Betsy" to Art and Wine Festival

She is Saved by Master Mechanic Lee Volquardsen

As any Lafayette citizen knows, "Old Betsy" is Lafayette's oldest surviving fire engine. Old Betsy's most recent excursion, in September, was to the glorious Lafayette Art and Wine Festival. The Lafayette Historical Society booth had lots of visitors, even though we were sandwiched between the generator for the inflated slide and the entertainment stage. Both these attractions drew many visitors who also came to see Old Betsy and talk to us.

On the way home, Old Betsy had an unexpected breakdown (perhaps, we suspect, caused by the excitement of the day), in the left turn lane at the corner of Moraga Road and St. Mary's Road. It turned out that Betsy had run out of gas, as she had been doing more and more often. With a little pushing, Betsy was out of the traffic pattern, but she had to be towed home.

We later learned from our best mechanic, Lee Volquardsen, that the source of the problem was a leaky gas line connection that caused a very minor drip. Even this small leak consumed most of the gas from the tank over the course of the day, however. Lee came to the rescue and installed the needed replacement parts. Betsy doesn't expect to have this problem again, but, just in case, she'll take some extra gas along next time.

Lee has seen Betsy through many problems, and she is appropriately grateful. Anyone who has worked on a very old car remembers having to clean the spark plugs regularly. That used to be done by scraping the carbon off the plug elements or by sandblasting the base of the plug. Lee has a better, more modern, solution. We now soak the plugs in a bath of Drano over night and then wash them off before reinstallation into the engine. The plugs come clean and the Drano washes off with water.

Lee has also rebuilt and installed Old Betsy's generator. We now keep the battery charged as we drive. LHS has spent some of the contributions made by its members toward old Betsy's restoration to buy a battery and generator, and we thank you all again.

We're proposing a storage area for Old Betsy at the new Library site where she can be seen, along with our collection of Fire Engine equipment and parts. In the construction process we hope to acquire access to and from the storage area, along with a workspace. With such facilities, we can demonstrate how this old machine works and what she has done in her past service to Lafayette.

—by George Wasson

LHS Dues for 2003

We value your membership in the Society, and we anticipate that 2003 will be a banner year for LHS, with many interesting events and opportunities to contribute to our work. We hope you will continue your membership by paying your 2003 LHS dues at your earliest convenience. Annual dues are $10 for a family membership. A life membership for a family is $100. If for any reason you are not interested in continuing your membership, please let us know. This will save printing and postage costs.

We look forward to seeing you in 2003.

Eight Bells: Time to Change the Watch on the *Californian*

On June 28, 2002, the state tall ship *Californian* was sold by the state to the San Diego Maritime Museum. With an overall length of 145 feet and carrying 7,000 square feet of sail, *Californian* has a maximum speed of 13.5 knots. Commissioned in 1983 as the official state tall ship of California, she was built by the Nautical Heritage Society and launched the following year at the northern end of San Diego Bay. From 1983 to 2002 she was also provided with a stipend, but in 2002 assistance for the *Californian* was terminated.

The *Californian* is a reconstruction of the 1848 revenue cutter C.W. Lawrence, which ended her service in 1850 when she ran aground and sank outside the Golden Gate. C.W. Lawrence's construction was state-of-the-art for that time. Revenue Service cutters were charged with securing revenue, relieving distressed merchant vessels and conducting scientific investigations of coastal harbors and water ways, much like our Coast Guard today.

For eighteen years, *Californian* has provided onboard educational and maritime programs for school children up and down the West Coast. She has voyaged to the East Coast to participate in various tall ship festivals and has made several passages to Hawaii, providing an unparalleled opportunity for her young crew to learn navigation and seamanship, and—most of all—working together in harmony.

Although the *Californian* is no longer the official state ship, she will continue to act as a sail-training platform for San Diego youth. We can feel glad that he has a wonderful new home at the San Diego Maritime Museum, sharing dock space with the Star of India, the oldest actively sailed square-rigged ship in the world, having been built in 1863. Lafayette residents will still be able to visit these fine ships when they travel to San Diego.

—by Paul Sheehan

2002/2003 Directors

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Vice President: Marechal Duncan	283-6812
Treasurer: Paul Sheehan	284-1287
Recording Secretary: Ruth Dyer	283-8312
Corresponding Secretary: Oliver Hamlin	283-6822
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Programs: Joseph Van Overveen	283-3650
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Fire Engine: George Wasson	284-4603
Membership: Oliver Hamlin	283-6822

Lafayette Historical Society Member Information (Please photocopy form for additional names)

Name: _____ Spouse: _____

Address: _____ City/State/Zip: _____

Daytime Phone: _____ Evening Phone: _____

Membership Categories & Annual Dues: (please check one)

____ Life membership--$100.00 (one time fee) ____ Family membership--$10.00

____ Business membership--$50.00 ____ Student membership--$2.50

Please indicate areas of special interest:

___ Annual dinner ___ Archives ___ LHS Online ___ Displays ___ Fire Engine

___ Landmarks ___ News Clips ___ Oral History ___ Photo collection ___ Programs

___ Research ___ Telephoning ___ Walking Tours ___ Other _____

Mail Check for dues $_____ and voluntary Fire Engine Maintenance contribution $_____ to:

LHS, PO Box 133, Lafayette, CA 94549

Lafayette Historical Society CALENDAR

Annual Pot Luck Dinner Meeting

Date:	Tuesday, May 13, 2003
Time:	6 pm Social Hour 7 pm Dinner 8 pm Short business items, followed by...
Speaker:	Jerome Waldie—Congressman in the 1960's and 70's, on the impeachments of Presidents Nixon and Clinton
Place:	Lafayette Veterans Memorial Hall, Mt. Diablo Blvd. at 1st St., lower floor (on 1st St.)

Fall Program Date and program to be announced

For information on membership, contact Oliver Hamlin, 283-6822.

Lafayette Historical Society
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